

Chinese Nationalists Bring Threat of Violence to Australia Universities

A clash with Hong Kong supporters at a student protest could be a dark omen of what's to come.



By Damien Cave

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BRISBANE, Australia — The Chinese nationalists disrupting pro-Hong Kong democracy rallies at the University of Queensland arrived 300 strong, with a speaker to blast China's national anthem. They deferred to a leader in a pink shirt. And their tactics included violence.

One video from the scene shows a student from Hong Kong being grabbed by the throat. Another shows a philosophy student, Drew Pavlou, 20, shouting, “Hey hey, ho ho, Xi Jinping has got to go,” until a counterprotester throws his megaphone aside.

The altercations, which took place last Wednesday in the main square of a major Australian university, were broken up by the police, but experts believe it could be a dark omen of what is to come as the passions of Hong Kong protesters ripple to other countries.

A similar scuffle broke out on Tuesday at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, when three Chinese men were filmed shouting down students from Hong Kong at a rally and pushing a young woman to the ground.

For Australia in particular, the past week signals trouble after years of gliding along and growing rich off China's growth. Australian universities have come to depend on Chinese donors, students and organizations that are often loyal to Beijing and intolerant of dissent.

More collisions with China's muscular nationalism now seem likely. Racist chants and insults have been traded, along with punches. The Chinese Consulate in Brisbane praised the “spontaneous patriotic behavior” of the pro-China activists — leading the Australian defense minister to take the extraordinary step of warning foreign diplomats against attempts to suppress free speech.

Deconstructing what led to the clashes on Wednesday, through interviews, online messages and videos, reveals just how volatile, racially charged and violent any reckoning with China may become.

“It would certainly be nice if it didn't escalate, but I remain quite concerned that the entire way this has been handled makes copycat attacks inevitable,” said Kevin Carrico, a senior lecturer in Chinese Studies at Monash University in Melbourne. “It's quite worrying.”



Drew Pavlou

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New activists and new causes

The protest began with two students: Jack Yiu, 21, a quiet psychology major from Hong Kong, and Mr. Pavlou, a chatty grandson of Greek immigrants from Brisbane.

Both new to activism, they didn't know each other until a few weeks ago.

Until recently, Mr. Yiu had led the university's Hong Kong Student Association, holding benign activities like welcome dinners. Mr. Pavlou was known on campus for starting a popular Facebook group for intellectual debate.

But recent events involving China, they said, forced them to act. Mr. Yiu said he had friends in Hong Kong marching for democracy and against a bill that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China. Mr. Pavlou said his own outrage was prompted by reading about Xinjiang, a region of China where the government has pushed minority Muslims into re-education camps.

"It's cultural genocide," Mr. Pavlou said.

Adding to his anger, he discovered his own university had cultivated close ties with Chinese officials. While the University of Queensland is one of several universities with a Confucius Institute — officially a program to promote Chinese language and culture — the vice chancellor, Peter Hoj, has made more of that relationship than his peers have.

The institute at the university plays a broader role, emphasizing collaboration with China in science, engineering and technology. Until late last year, Mr. Hoj was an unpaid consultant for the Confucius Institute headquarters. This month, he granted a visiting professorship to the Chinese consul general in Brisbane, Xu Jie, bringing a Communist Party official into university life at a time when the United States, Canada and several European countries have cut ties.

"It's part of this China illiteracy, which is quite prevalent in Australia," said Louisa Lim, a professor at the University of Melbourne and the author of "The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited."

"In many cases," she said, "the allure of Chinese investment and large numbers of Chinese students has been so overwhelming that educational institutions have just thrown their arms wide open without doing their due diligence."



The University of Queensland's vice chancellor, Peter Hoj, right, with Xu Jie, the Chinese consul general in Brisbane, Australia, in a photo released by the Chinese Consulate this month. The Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Brisbane

In a statement online, the University of Queensland said that the consul general would not be teaching and was one of 260 titleholders appointed in recent years.

But for Mr. Pavlou, who is majoring primarily in philosophy, his university's warm welcome has legitimized a culture of disinformation and censorship. He said his anger crystallized after a student Facebook group, called StalkerSpace, filled up with pro-China statements around the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June.

"I saw all these people denying things that happened or stating the official government line on it, and like to me, that was really disgusting and horrifying," Mr. Pavlou said.

A recent poll of Australians' views on foreign affairs, by the Lowy Institute, found that many Australians were experiencing a similar shift: Only 32 percent of respondents said they trust China either "a great deal" or "somewhat" to act responsibly, a 20-point fall from 2018.

Mr. Pavlou said the recent protests in Hong Kong were an inspiration. He found Mr. Yiu through other activists, and they agreed to back-to-back rallies on July 24: The Hong Kong students would start at 10 a.m.; Mr. Pavlou and his group, broadening the focus to the university's China ties, would start at noon.

Mr. Pavlou posted a notice of the event on Facebook. That's when the trouble started.

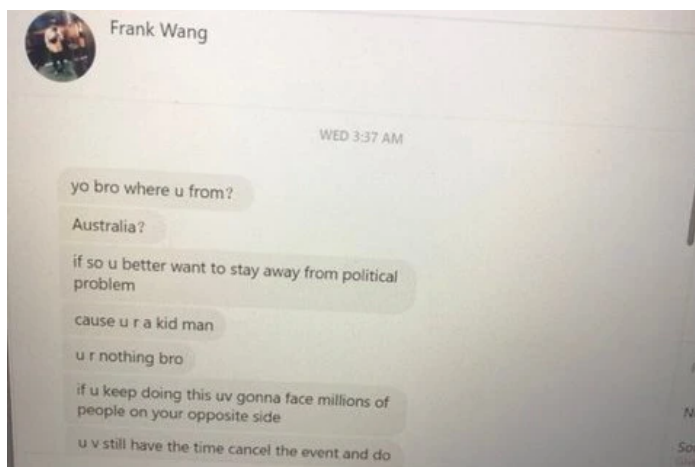
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Counterprotesters emerge

"Yo bro where u from? Australia?" said the Facebook message from an account with the name Frank Wang. "If so u better want to stay away from political problem."

"Cancel the event," the message continued. "If u keep doing this, uv gonna face millions of people on your opposite side."

Other messages were more aggressive. Mixing Chinese and English, some people called Mr. Pavlou a white pig, using a pig emoji. One comment in Chinese said: "When will you die."



A threatening message that Drew Pavlou received on Facebook.
Drew Pavlou

Mr. Pavlou was drawn into trading insults with some of them. "It was out of fear and anger," he said. "It was silly. I regret it."

Nonetheless, he carried on. The first protest was uneventful. A wall filled up with sticky notes of support, mirroring those in Hong Kong. But by the time Mr. Pavlou and a few others started their protest, a crowd had gathered.

Several people there estimated that about 300 people — appearing to be a mix of Chinese students and nonstudents — appeared suddenly. Within minutes, someone had grabbed Mr. Pavlou's megaphone, prompting him to jump up and push back.

Security guards intervened, but the leader of the counterprotesters demanded an apology on China's behalf.

"We tried to talk to them," Mr. Yiu said. "On the megaphone, I told them, we're just fighting for Hong Kong democracy, not independence."

By 2:15 p.m., it had grown tense. Mr. Pavlou, who had continued the protest inside the Confucius Institute's offices, re-emerged to see 50 or so Hong Kong students surrounded.

Priya De, 22, a leader with the socialist group that connected Mr. Yiu and Mr. Pavlou, said she heard white Australians shouting "Go back to China" at the Chinese students, and "Deport them, deport them."

A video shot by a Hong Kong student showed David Chui, 23, a business student from Hong Kong, being grabbed by the throat and thrown to the ground.

Christy Leung, 21, another Hong Kong student, said a sign was torn from her hands and her clothing ripped. She and Mr. Chui went to the police to press charges. They were told there was nothing they could do.

"I don't know how to be hopeful," Ms. Leung said. "People told me to report it and I did, but it didn't work."

The aftermath

Mr. Pavlou's group is planning another protest this week. The university said that it opened an investigation into the clash, and it issued a statement defending free speech but proposing that the demonstration be held in a more remote area of campus.

“It’s simply a way to starve the protest of visibility,” Mr. Pavlou said.

Some students would rather see it canceled. A half-dozen students from mainland China interviewed around campus on Tuesday called any demonstration against Chinese influence unnecessary and useless.

Some activists on the left, noting that the Hong Kong Student Association is not involved, said they worried that any protest led by Australians who were not from Hong Kong or mainland China would only contribute to anti-Chinese racism.

But for Mr. Pavlou, Mr. Yiu, and many others, there is no turning back. A group of Tibetan students has aligned with Mr. Pavlou’s group, calling for the university to shut down its Confucius Institute.

Mr. Yiu and his fellow Hong Kong students are planning more rallies, coordinating with groups all over Australia.

“People in Hong Kong are risking their lives,” Ms. Leung said. “The threats we faced last week are nothing compared to them. We have to stand up. With them.”

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